Hunting for the Mystery Touch

—"Was it always in your plan to leave eventually?

Because to me, there's no one else that could make sense to me

The last and final puzzle piece."

sombr - 12 to 12

The neon of the warehouse had faded into the harsh reality of Monday morning, but the noise in Est's head hadn't stopped pounding.

He sat on his usual stool in the studio, the chill of the air conditioning doing nothing to numb the frantic rhythm of his pulse. Every mechanical click of a camera shutter felt like a small explosion in the quiet sanctuary he had tried to build around himself. He kept his eyes glued to the monitor, pretending to review the latest test shots, but his mind was elsewhere. It had been all weekend.

As the week began, he felt like a soggy sponge—saturated with too much confusion, too much déjà vu, and too many fractured memories he couldn't piece together.

In the dark, the mystery man had been overwhelming, passionate, and heavy. In the light, William was quiet, polite, and constantly stepped back into the shadows.

Est couldn't reconcile how someone who had held him so tightly could act like a total stranger during the day.

It hurt.

It hurt to realize that while he had been spiraling, crying on his bed, desperately searching for clues, William had known everything. William had watched him struggle in total silence. Est wondered why William had kept the secret.

The immediate, hurtful thought was: Was I just a mistake to him? Was that night something he wanted to forget so badly that he hid behind a professional mask?

Despite the hurt and confusion, Est's body and heart refused to turn away from William.

The attraction hadn't faded; it had intensified.

When William had grabbed his wrists at the rave, Est's pulse had instantly remembered the weight and heat of that touch. Even knowing the truth—or at least suspecting it—Est found himself completely drawn to William. Est touched his own wrists where William had held him on the dance floor, feeling the ghost of that grip, realizing he wasn't angry—he was just desperately confused.

And terrified.

He realized how fragile their connection really was. William wasn't permanent. He was a freelance shadow who could disappear from Est's professional life just as easily as he had disappeared from the twisted sheets that morning.

Est finished his remaining duties on total autopilot, completely detached from reality. His body moved through the motions—packing up his things, offering polite nods to crew members—but his mind remained entirely fixed on the riddle of William and the twisted sheets.

Down on the first floor, Est spotted Hong.

Hong had already wrapped his shoot; his hair was still styled from the set, but his face was completely makeup-free, and he was wearing a simple black t-shirt and jeans. The stripped-back look made Hong feel grounded, safe, and approachable.

"Hong," Est called out, his voice rougher than he intended.

Hong turned, a small smile on his lips. "Hey. You done for the day?"

Est nodded, swallowing hard. "Can we—can we talk? Just for a minute?"

Hong's expression shifted immediately to concern. "Of course. Let's grab a table."

They sat in the corner of the studio's small breakroom, away from the scattered crew members packing up for the day. Est stared down at his hands, his fingers trembling slightly.

"I don't even know where to start," Est admitted quietly.

Hong leaned forward, his voice gentle. "Just start anywhere. I'm listening."

Est took a shaky breath. "The peace I thought I found... it was an illusion. I thought I'd let go of that night, of the mystery person. But I didn't. And now I—" His voice broke. "I think I know who it was. And it's so much worse than not knowing."

Hong's eyes widened slightly. "You know?"

"I think so," Est whispered. "And I don't know what to do with it. I don't know if I'm angry or hurt or just... confused. I feel like I've been mourning someone who's been standing three feet away from me this whole time."

Hong was quiet for a moment, processing. "Have you talked to them?"

"No," Est said, his voice tight. "I don't even know how to start that conversation. What do I say? 'Hey, I remember your hands, and my body knows it was you, but

you've been pretending to be a stranger all week'?"

Hong let out a soft sigh. "Est, I'm not the best at giving grand life advice. But I know someone who is."

Est looked up, confusion flickering across his face.

Hong stood up, offering Est his hand. "Come on. We're going to see Nut."

The car ride with Hong was quiet. The afternoon light faded over the Bangkok traffic, the city shifting from the harsh glare of the studio to the softer, more intimate world they were heading toward.

"He's going to help you see clearly," Hong said softly, his hand briefly squeezing Est's shoulder. "That's what Nut does. He takes the broken pieces and shows you how they're supposed to fit together."

Hong didn't push Est to talk. He just stayed close, his presence a quiet.

When they pulled up to Nut's building, Est felt a wave of warmth wash over him. As they reached the entrance, Hong pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the door himself—a small, simple testament to the uncomplicated life Hong and Nut shared.

Inside, the heavy door closed behind them, shielding them from the incessant noise of Bangkok traffic. The space was purely artistic, permeated by the smell of ink and stencil cleaner. Amid it all, the pink aerial silks contrasted sharply with the gray sofa in Nut's dining area.

Nut was waiting for them, sitting at his heavy wooden desk under a bright, adjustable lamp, with a sketchbook open before him. He didn't seem surprised to see them. He simply set his pencil down, his dark eyes fixed on Est's pale, exhausted expression, and gestured for them to sit.

Sitting across from the tattoo artist, surrounded by framed design sheets and the soft murmur of the studio, Est finally let his heavy defenses dissolve completely.

"I'm not angry," Est whispered, his fingers tracing his own wrists, remembering the heat of William's grip on the dance floor. "I'm just... I'm so desperately confused. He held me so tightly in the dark, but in the light, he acts like a total stranger. I don't know how to look at him anymore."

Nut listened to every word in silence. He didn't interrupt, and he didn't offer empty, platonic comforts. He simply leaned back, his gaze shifting briefly to Hong before looking directly back at Est.

"You want to know the truth?" Nut said softly, his voice cutting straight through the

lingering tension in the room. "The two of you are being completely foolish."

Est blinked, caught off guard by the directness.

"William isn't running from you because you were a mistake, Est," Nut explained gently, leaning forward so his forearms rested on the table. "He's running because he's terrified of destroying the peace you said you wanted. He thinks he's protecting you by being a shadow. And you're sitting here drowning in your own head, assuming the worst because neither of you has the nerve to drop the armor."

Nut tapped his fingers against the wooden table, his tone shifting to one of quiet, encouraging command. "The countdown is over, Est. The party is done. You need to stop looking through him, and you need to stop running. It's time to finally get up the courage, go to his place, and talk to William."

Est swallowed hard, his chest tight. "What if—what if he doesn't want to talk to me?"

"Then you'll know," Nut said simply. "But at least you won't be sitting here torturing yourself with what-ifs."

Est nodded slowly, the weight of Nut's words settling over him.

A moment later, his phone buzzed. Nut had sent him William's address. Est stared at the screen, his pulse racing.

"Thank you," Est said quietly, standing up.

Hong walked him to the door, watching as Est's ride pulled up. "You've got this," Hong said, giving Est's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

Est nodded, stepping into the car. As the vehicle pulled away into the evening light, Hong and Nut stood in the doorway, watching him go.

When they went back inside, the studio was quiet again. Nut walked into the kitchen to make a fresh pot of coffee. Hong followed him, leaning against the counter. As Hong looked out the kitchen window, he caught a sudden movement in the glass. In the reflection of the window, he saw a clear shadow sitting on the dark stairs.

Hong turned around and let out a long, loud sigh.

Lego was sitting right there on the steps, his chin resting in his hands, looking completely amused. He hadn't missed a single word.

Nut walked back into the room with the coffee, completely unbothered, and smiled when he saw him. "By the way, Lego is here," Nut said casually to Hong.

Lego grinned. "Don't mind me. I'm just here for the drama."

Hong shook his head, but a small smile tugged at his lips. "Of course you are."

That night, Est lay in the quiet of his room, letting his mind wander back to that blurred night. He half-remembered the overwhelming warmth, the careful hands, the deep voice asking, He remembered the deep, genuine concern in William's voice when he had paused to ask, "Is everything alright? Are you too drunk?"

He remembered melting into the touch like wax, completely dropping the perfect armor he usually wore to keep the world at a distance.

Most of all, he remembered the unfinished tattoo on the man's back stretching in the low light, and the unbearably gentle kiss placed on his forehead before the morning sun left him alone in an empty bed.

It was a beautiful, sentimental ache, but it was also deeply confusing.

Est couldn't reconcile how the man who had held him so desperately in the dark could act like a polite stranger during the day.

"It wasn't a dream," Est whispered to the empty room. "He was actually there."

Now, looking at the address Nut had sent to his phone, the anxious noise in Est's head finally began to quiet down. He knew his mind was too heavy and exhausted to go tonight. He needed to be clear. He needed to be steady.

Tomorrow, the running would stop.

Tomorrow, he would finally step out of the shadows, go to William's doorstep, and bring their secret out into the light.

Meanwhile, at the university, Tui and William were talking in the computer lab.

"How long are you going to watch him from behind the lens?" Tui's voice was low and steady, cutting through the hum of the university's computer lab. He was looking over William's shoulder, his gaze fixed on the bright screen.

On it, a single photograph of Est was pulled up.

William let out a soft, heavy sigh. In the image, Est looked breathtakingly beautiful, vibrant, and entirely full of life—a sharp, painful contrast to everything William felt he was.

Est was a famous model, a person who moved through a world of glamour and high fashion. Even his ex-partner, Kai, was another model—someone who was everything William wasn't. To William, it felt like a statistical anomaly that they had ever crossed paths, let alone ended up in the same bed. He felt like a ghost who had accidentally stumbled into a prince's dream.

"You think too little of yourself, William," Tui said gently, placing a grounding hand on his shoulder.

William stared at the screen, the cursor blinking against Est's perfectly sculpted jawline.

"I don't know how to face him, Tui," William admitted quietly. "Every time I see him, I feel like I'm stealing something that doesn't belong to me."

"You're not stealing anything," Tui said firmly. "You were there. You held him. You cared for him. That's real, William. That's not something you can just erase by hiding."

William closed his eyes. "What if he doesn't want me? What if that night was just—"

"Stop," Tui interrupted. "Stop torturing yourself with what-ifs. You'll never know unless you talk to him, Stop deciding for him what he can or can't handle. Stop hiding. Just... ask him.""

William nodded slowly, though the fear still coiled tightly in his chest.

The next morning, Est arrived at William's address. He was dressed simply—a soft, slightly oversized cream sweater and simple trousers. His hair was a little messy from the Bangkok humidity, and his face was completely bare, exposing the faint, tired shadows under his eyes. Today, Est was just himself.

As he climbed the stairs, his pulse was pounding. He placed a hand over his wrist, feeling the ghost of William's grip from the rave to keep himself grounded. Est stood outside the door for a long, quiet moment. He could hear the faint, muffled sound of an old fan humming inside.

He realized that behind this piece of wood was the answer to all his twisted sheets and lonely midnights, His hand trembled slightly.

He took a deep breath.

And knocked.

When the door cracked open, the air carried a comforting blend of darkroom chemicals, clean laundry, blooming jasmine, and a hint of the incense Nut used at the studio. Unlike the harsh, blinding studio lights, the apartment was bathed in a gentle, golden light filtering through cheap, thin curtains.

The space itself was small but incredibly cozy—a classic one-room student apartment where every square inch was utilized with care. Just past the entryway, a large wooden bookcase packed tightly with William's textbooks, notebooks, and

personal belongings served as a makeshift wall. Peeking through the gaps of the shelves, Est could see the edge of William's unmade bed.

On a simple wooden desk sat a heavy, vintage Leica M6. Right next to it, a neat, perfectly organized row of skincare bottles stood like tiny soldiers. Est realized that the gentle, observant boy he had fallen for in the dark had been right here, hiding in plain sight, all along.

William stood in the doorway, frozen. He had expected Lego, or a delivery driver—not Est.

Purely out of instinct, he took a step back, suddenly feeling exposed.

Est didn't let him disappear. He stepped firmly into the doorway, breaking the boundary. "I'm tired of looking through you, William," Est said quietly, his voice trembling. "And I'm tired of running."

William's breath caught. As he nervously tensed up, the collar of his loose shirt shifted slightly aside. Est caught a fleeting glimpse of the fresh, raw black lines of the unfinished tattoo on William's back.

It was the ultimate, undeniable proof.

The mystery man from the dark room was standing right in front of him.

As the truth finally settled between them, a long, heavy silence fell over the small apartment. Neither of them spoke; they just stood there, breathing the same air. There were no flashing cameras to hide behind, no heavy lighting diffusers to hold as a shield, and no managers scheduling their every breath.

In that golden morning light, there was just a boy who spent his whole life wanting to be seen, and a boy who was finally, beautifully brave enough to look.

"Why did you let me suffer, William?" Est asked, his voice barely above a whisper, breaking slightly. "Why did you hold me in the dark as if I were everything to you, but then turn away and ignore me completely during the day? You watched me sink. You were three feet away from me, and you didn't say a single word."

William flinched, the words piercing right through his fragile defenses.

"I thought I was preserving your peace," William admitted, his voice rough. "Look at yourself, Est. You're a famous model. You move in a world of glamour. I'm just a student. To me, the fact that our paths crossed already seemed ridiculous. I thought... I thought that night had been nothing more than a mistake for you. A mistake you wanted to forget."

Est couldn't bear it.

Slowly, deliberately, he reached out and grasped William's wrists, placing his fingers precisely where William had gripped him on the dance floor.

"You weren't a mistake, William," Est whispered fiercely. "Don't ever say that again. You're the only part of that whole night that felt real to me, When I felt you, when you touched me, I realized that all the people who'd been in my bed before never cared about me the way you did. They never asked if I was okay. They never held me like I mattered."

William shifted nervously, trying to turn his head away, but as he moved, the loose collar of his cotton shirt slipped down further. The soft morning light caught the stark, raised ink cutting across William's skin.

Est froze, his eyes locking onto the fresh, raw black lines—the Skeleton Flower.

"I've been looking for you," Est whispered, his voice trembling. "I've been trying so hard to find you. And you've been right here... you've been here all this time."

William finally stopped trying to disappear. He slowly turned his head back and looked Est directly in the eyes. Est didn't hesitate anymore. He took just one soft step forward, completely closing the distance between their heartbeats.

The height difference was perfect.

Leaning in, Est pressed his lips to William's in a shy, slow kiss.

It was gentle and hesitant at first, but the moment their skin met, the last of William's defenses shattered. With a soft, quiet sigh, William leaned into the warmth and returned the kiss.

When their lips parted, Est didn't step back. He kept his fingers resting gently against William's wrists, feeling the rapid flutter of William's pulse.

William let out a long, shaky breath, his forehead resting gently against Est's shoulder. "I'm sorry," William whispered.

Est let out a soft, wet laugh, his eyes shining as he reached up to cup William's jawline. "You're lucky you're cute," Est said, his voice warm.

It wasn't a dream. Every single detail was real.